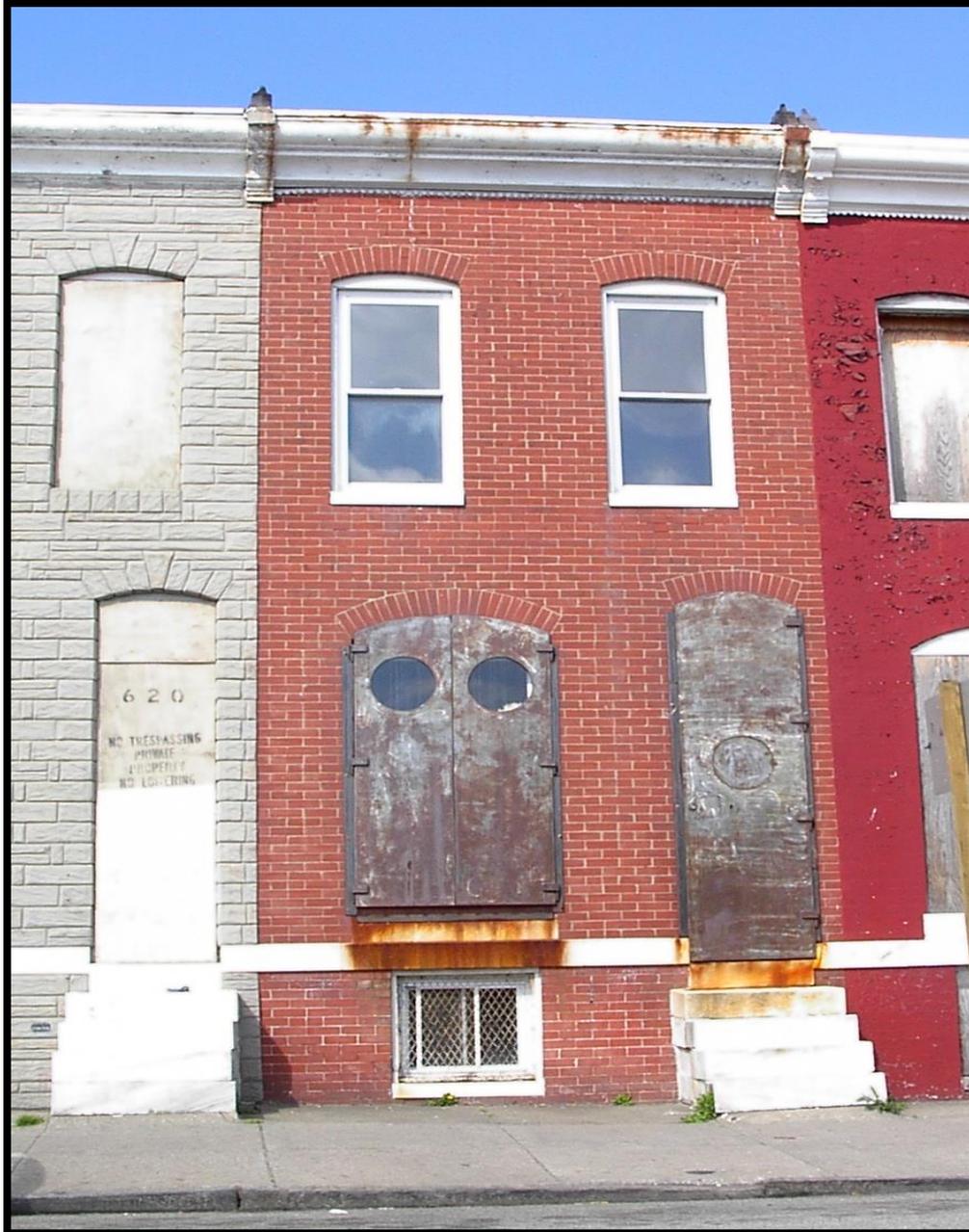


**Johnny Eck House**  
622 North Milton Avenue  
**Baltimore City Local Landmark**  
**Designation Report**



**The Commission for Historical and Architectural  
Preservation Public Hearing July 18, 2006**

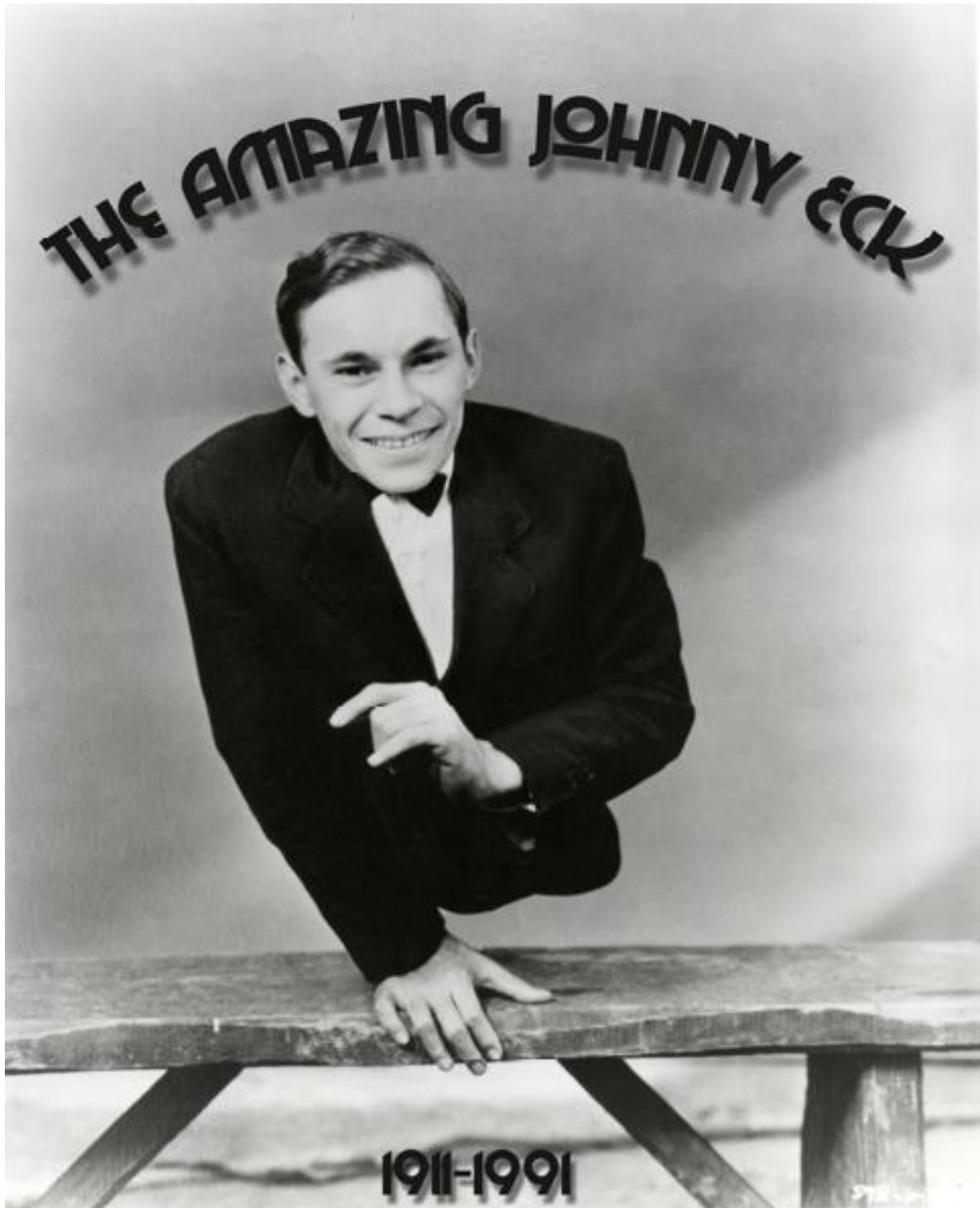
The Commission for Historical and Architectural Preservation has the responsibility of recommending to the Mayor and City Council of Baltimore the adoption of ordinances designating districts and landmarks within the limits of the City of Baltimore, having special historical, architectural, educational, cultural, social or community significance, interest, or value as Baltimore City Historic Districts or Landmarks, thereby necessitating their preservation and protection. In making its recommendation, the Commission shall give appropriate consideration to the following standards. In reaching its decision, the Commission shall clearly state which standards have been applied.

A Baltimore City Landmark may be a site, structure, landscape, building (or portion thereof), place, work of art, or other object which:

1. dates from a particular period having a significant character, interest, or value, as part of the development, heritage, or culture of the City of Baltimore; or
2. is associated with the life of an outstanding historical person or persons; or
3. is the site of an historic event with a significant effect upon the cultural, political, economic, social, or historic heritage of the City of Baltimore; or
4. is significant of the architectural period in which it was built and has distinguishing characteristics of an architectural style, method of construction, or engineering, or is the notable work of a master builder, designer, engineer, artist, or architect whose individual genius influenced his age; or
5. contributes information of historical, cultural, or social importance relating to the heritage of the community; or
6. has yielded, or may be likely to yield, archeological information important in history or prehistory.

The Johnny Eck house (622 North Milton Avenue) meets **criteria two** as the house of Johnny Eck (Johnathon Eckhardt), a handicapped-man born without the lower portion of the abdomen and legs who achieved fame and recognition as a performer, movie actor, and painter. 622 North Milton Avenue is currently owned by Jeffrey Gordon who initiated the landmark designation. Gordon’s long term plans are to eventually house a museum chronicling the life of Johnny Eck. The building is structurally sound and well secured.





From [www.johnnyeckmuseum.com](http://www.johnnyeckmuseum.com)

## History

Johnny Eck was born without legs and a lower abdomen on August 27, 1911, at 622 Milton Avenue. John's older sister Caroline taught him to read and write by the age of four. After leaving school at the age of 14, he earned a living as a traveling entertainer, typist, actor, and artist. He extensively traveled, performing in many shows and earning a reputation as a master magician.

Because Johnny's opportunities were greatly limited by his handicap, he jumped at the chance to join the carnival. He performed with Ringling Brothers, Barnum and Bailey, the Great Sheesley and many other carnivals. He became a talented animal trainer, magician, acrobat, juggler, and trapeze artist.

In 1931, Johnny became an actor in Tod Browning's classic movie *Freaks*, which poignantly humanized people with physical disabilities. By 1937, Johnny already had become a local legend in Baltimore. On June 7, 1937, the *News Post* wrote the following article:

### The Most Remarkable Man Alive

Johnny Eck was born in Baltimore, MD, August 27, 1910 [1911]. He is a twin, but his brother Robert is perfectly normal in every way. Johnny was born with no legs or lower abdomen whatsoever, yet he has gone to school the same as any other boy – walking on the palms of his hands in regular stride. He graduated from high school at the age of 14, and has since become adept as an artist, musician, typist, acrobat and entertainer. Always in perfect health, Johnny is possessed with an unusually sunny disposition. He has never had a sick day in his life, eats anything he wants, and he seems to enjoy life more than most normal folks.

When he was in his twenties, he started to paint window and door screens. Screen painting is a local folk art tradition that involves painting detailed pictures, usually pastoral scenes, on window and door screens. The tradition began around 1913 when William Octavec, while working at Eclipse Air Brush Company in New Jersey, painted a window screen for a secretary who complained about being constantly interrupted by people outside her office. The painting prevented people from looking into the office. Around 1916 William Octavec, after moving to East Baltimore, painted a screen for his corner grocery store. By the late 1920s, painted screens decorated many East Baltimore rowhouses.

Johnny began to paint and draw as a boy, taking art classes from William Octavec in the 1920s. Eventually, Eck began working for Octavec, preparing the screens for painting. By the 1930s, Johnny began painting his own screens. In fact, Octavec would send customers to Johnny, especially if the customers were looking for winter scenes. William Octavec died in 1956, and the painted screen tradition was carried on by his sons and other artists like Johnny Eck. In 1983, the Baltimore Museum of Art opened a painted screen exhibition which toured nationally. Several of Eck's paintings were featured.

Folklorist Elaine Eff described Johnny in a *Sun Magazine* article 9/26/1982:

Johnny Eck, a man who might well be designated one of East Baltimore's local treasures, holds court daily on his front stoop on Milton Avenue. It is from this vantage point that he captivates an ever-changing audience of young and old with tales about his birth in that very house, about the barn-like lumber yard that once stood across the street, where he and his twin brother Rob used to play, about his years with carnival and circus midways and arcades, about the two Hollywood movies he appeared in (which have made him something of a cult figure) and about the days at William Octavec's art shop around the corner.

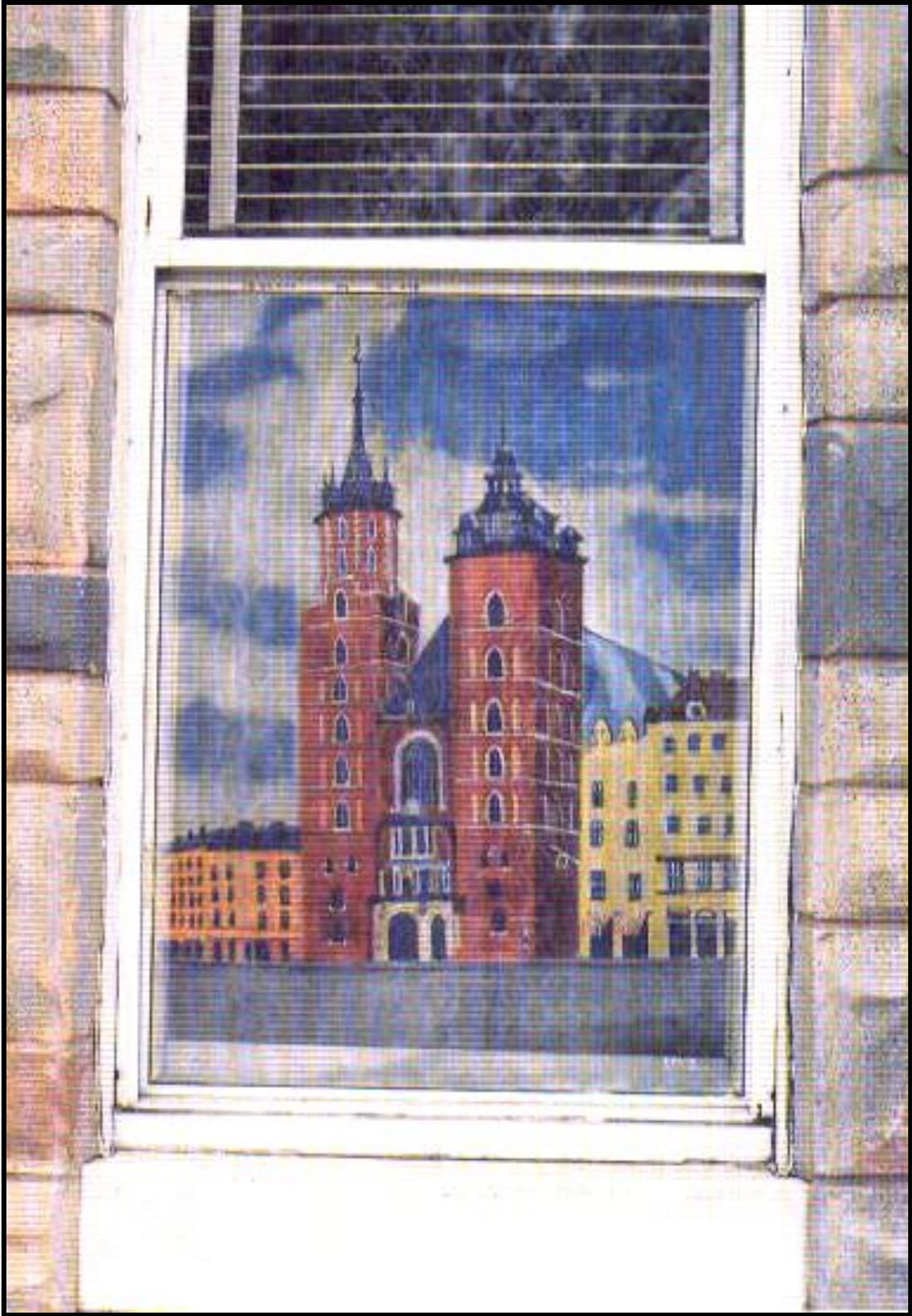
Johnny Eck passed away on January 5, 1991, in the same house in which he was born. Currently, several websites chronicle Eck's life, and several documentaries and two Hollywood feature-length films are currently being produced about him. In addition, Hollywood director Tim Burton is currently working on a movie about Robert "believe-it-or-not" Ripley, in which Johnny Eck is a character.



From [www.johnnyeckmuseum.com](http://www.johnnyeckmuseum.com)



**Johnny Eck with his brother Robert, from [www.johnnyeckmuseum.com](http://www.johnnyeckmuseum.com)**



Painted screen by Johnny Eck, from *Baltimore's Painted Screens* (Towson State University, 1982)



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